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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: FREE AND FAIR LOCAL ELECTIONS? APRIL FOOLS!

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11. SUMMARY: Three districts in Tajikistan's southern Khatlon region held local by-elections April 1 for seats in the national parliament vacated by parliamentarians appointed to Ministries and other positions. Despite the lower profile of the April 1 elections as compared to the November 2006 presidential election, the by-elections saw no shortage of political party drama and election procedure violations. Candidates from the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan withdrew from the race in two districts and the candidates from President Rahmonov's ruling party, the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan won handily in all three districts: Firdavsi, Kulyab and Hamodoni. A group of bilateral missions and international organizations organized an informal observation mission to signal to the government that foreign missions remain interested in democratic progress and election reform even after the high profile presidential election. Observers witnessed violations in the election process including family voting and proxy voting and a low voter turnout which should have invalidated the elections. END SUMMARY.

12. The cold and rainy elections day lacked the fanfare of the November 5, 2006, presidential election. No roses were handed out; no bands greeted voters; and no Tajik dancing girls boosted voters' spirits. The local elections were more low-key and this time fewer international observers meant that officials were not on their toes.

#### ISLAMIC PARTY WITHDRAWS IN PROTEST

13. Days before local elections April 1 in Firdavsi, Kulyab and Hamodoni districts, two Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan candidates withdrew from the elections, eliminating the last semblance of a real multi-party election. On March 30, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan candidate in the Firdavsi region withdrew his candidacy. The district election commission agreed to his withdrawal and polling stations were instructed to cross his name off the ballot. At a press conference March 31 on the eve of the elections, Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan leaders announced that Saidibrihim Nazarov, the candidate running in Kulyab District, would also withdraw. The party was angry that the election officials refused to permit Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan poll observers to sit on polling station commissions on voting day so that party members could register voters,

observe the process and participate in vote tabulation at the end of the day.

¶4. The district election commission chairman acknowledged that the commission received the withdrawal statement, but denied the request. The commission did not inform polling stations or the public of the withdrawal. The commission cited a 2005 rule stating that candidates must inform the commission 24 hours prior to withdrawing. The district election commission chairman also tried to justify his decision to PolOff by explaining that polling station commissions should comprise of non-partisan neutral members. He did not have a response when PolOff pointed out that many polling station members belong to the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan or Communist Party of Tajikistan.

¶5. In Hamodoni district, the Islamic Renaissance Party insisted on running its candidate because it was the first time the party fielded a candidate in the region and it wanted to strengthen its base there. In all three districts, the People's Democratic Party's candidates won with over 90 percent of the vote.

#### VOTERS HAVE A VOICE, BUT DO NOT SPEAK OUT

¶6. The team of unofficial diplomatic and international observers met April 2 in Dushanbe to exchange information. Observers in all districts witnessed the same pattern of family voting and proxy voting. Some observers even saw evidence of ballot stuffing. Observers saw more men than women in polling stations. Most polling stations were in run-down schools and the schools' principals headed the polling commissions in most cases. The principals were more interested in talking about the poor state of their schools and assistance needs rather than the candidates.

¶7. PolOff questioned one polling election station commissioner why the same person had signed for multiple people. She blatantly admitted that the person tried to disguise his handwriting for each person, but could not. In another station,

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PolOff pointed out to the station chairperson that a voter had three ballots in his hand. The chairperson called the voter over, but did not tell him to put the ballots back. Both the voter and chairperson looked at PolOff sheepishly. The voter explained that his wife and son were sick and he would vote for them. Based on the excuses PolOff received throughout the day, the majority of people in Kulyab were sick on April 1 and could not make it to the polling stations.

¶8. A valid election requires a voter turnout of over 50 percent. By ten in the morning on April 1, some polling stations reported over 70 percent turnout. However, based on the few voters they actually saw trickling into the station at any given time, international observers agree the numbers did not amount to over 50 percent of the electorate.

¶9. PolOff questioned voters and election commission personnel on what were the most important issues of the election. Universally, voters returned a blank stare. Rephrased another way, "What are the most important problems you hope the election winner will resolve?" the answer was overwhelmingly: electricity. Voters wanted reliable and constant electricity in their businesses and homes. However, voters also told PolOff that they did not believe any of the candidates would be able to resolve the electricity issue. Most voters did not know who the candidates were or their platforms, although candidates did campaign before the elections. Some of the voters were "encouraged" by People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan members to come out and vote. Some people in the town of Kulyab had no idea April 1 was an election day.

¶10. COMMENT: The Islamic Renaissance Party's decision to hold a press conference and make their grievances public defied the government's desire to hold elections with the appearance of multi-party participation. Knowing that the party's candidates would not have a fair chance at winning the election, a public

withdrawal allowed the Islamic Renaissance Party to make a big political statement. Rumor has it that the Islamic Party plans to run a high profile candidate in upcoming by-elections in May and it may be trying to gain traction for that race.

¶11. Based on the April 1 informal election observation mission, not much has improved since the presidential election. The Central Commission for Elections and Referenda has received the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights preliminary election observation mission report for the November 2006 presidential election and knows that it must implement legislative changes and procedural improvements to meet international standards. But getting the message to the local level and changing individual voters' mentality will be difficult. END COMMENT.  
JACOBSON